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Martz pledges help for federal funds

Gov. Judy Martz has pledged to help find federal funding for long-term asbestos-related health care for the Libby area but stopped short of offering money from the state budget.

During a March 27 meeting, the governor expressed concerns about the potential for state funding but offered to ask federal Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson for a national "white lung" program for asbestos victims, said county sanitarian Ron Anderson.

Anderson met with Martz along with Tracy Velazquez of Bozeman, who along with her husband has been retained by Lincoln County to seek grants for long-term health care using funding appropriated by the 2001 state Legislature; and John Johanson, vice president of First National Bank and a member of a board appointed by the county commissioners to oversee a \$2.75 million settlement in an access dispute between W.R. Grace and the Environmental Protection Agency that is intended to provide for health care needs not

met by Grace's existing medical plan.

Martz designated a liaison from the state Department of Public Health and Human Services to work with the Libby community to ensure that state and federal resources are properly coordinated, Anderson said. The governor was adamant that money from the state's settlement with tobacco companies would not be used in connection with asbestos-related projects in Libby but did agree to look into whether a portion of a federal grant to the state for analysis of

health care costs could be used to study potential asbestos-related costs, Anderson said.

"I think all in all it produced the results that we needed, and that was public commitment," he said.

Other potential actions suggested to Martz during the meeting included creating a statewide education program on the dangers of asbestos exposure at home and working with the state attorney general's office to investigate possible legal avenues for securing health care funding from responsible parties.